

Book Review:

Child Protection Systems in the United Kingdom. A Comparative Analysis

by

Anne Stafford, Nigel Parton, Sharon Vincent and Connie Smith

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In an era of comparative analysis, often aiming to address child welfare in different continents and welfare state regimes, a book analysing child welfare systems within the UK is an interesting contribution. Intra-country comparison is a welcome choice, not only for the UK with its four constituent countries, but also for other countries as well. In countries with decentralised child welfare, such as the Nordic countries, there is national child welfare legislation, but the local or regional authorities have such an essential role in implementing the legislation that a variety of 'child protection systems' seem to exist in the same country. Thus the interest to analyse intra-country trends and differences is recognised outside the UK as well.

The book has a twofold interest: first, it describes the child welfare systems in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and secondly, it compares them with child welfare systems elsewhere. The focus in the latter is very much on 'the Anglophone countries', as the authors put it, but some wider comparisons are made as well. The UK intra-country comparison lacks the language obstacles known in most comparative studies, and yet the book demonstrates that child welfare terms, even when in the same language, do not fully correspond to each other. Indeed, careful reading is needed to fully understand the systems and practices outside one's own experience.

A qualitative case study approach is applied to this comparative study. The method implies that the researchers are immersed in each country (= each case) allowing issues and themes to emerge. Thus, country-specific stories are told. The aim of this exercise is to learn by comparing. This modestly and sympathetically described aim is grounded in a thorough analysis of comparative research methodology. In that respect, it is surprising that there is no detailed information of how the country stories were actually told. The micro practices of story-telling are also very important when making stories of whole countries. The reasons not to address any major social or political explanations of the system responses and their country-specific tendencies, for example, would have been interesting to read about. The contexts of all the countries in question are, after all, not necessarily well known to non-UK readers.

When looking at English, Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish child welfare, the book explores the present legislation and practice, their shortcomings as well as their development to their present state. The analytic gaze moves purposefully between macro, meso and micro levels. The material includes legislation, policy papers and relevant research. As a result, the book illustrates child welfare in these constituent parts of the UK in detail. However, instead of being a report of each country, it casts light on some fundamental issues of child welfare. This owes a lot to the structure of the book. The book is divided into chapters such as 'Managing Individual Cases where there are Child Protection Concerns', 'Assessment Frameworks' and 'Child Death Review Processes', which include the English, Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish analyses and concluding remarks. The structure thus avoids the common comparative research style which presents results country by country. At the same time, the book is still very informative about the different parts of the UK as it describes the present child welfare legislation and practice in detail and provides a variety of formal statistical information. It makes an ideal handbook for anyone who wants to find out whether there is a mandatory reporting system, what a children's hearing is about or how many notifications have been given in each country.

Unlike some more conventional presentations of child protection, the book also discusses offender management systems across the UK. An entire chapter is devoted to the legislation and practices to protect children from those identified to be of potential risk to them, meaning especially sexual and violent offenders. The system is very much about information exchange between different authorities, and in this regard, the countries tend to differ considerably. Nevertheless, there is some mystery as to why the chapter was included in the first place and why other indirect child protection practices were excluded from the book. However, the detailed description might be very useful for some readers.

In the concluding chapter, the authors state that in all four countries, policy and guidance governing child protection have remained relatively unchanged

over the past last ten years even though there have been some significant reforms in child protection policy towards prevention, early intervention and family support. The numbers of children entering the system have also remained rather static. The authors also assume that the experiences of children and families served by the child protection system have possibly not changed much. Further, the board tendencies tend to be very alike among the four countries (and not so different from many other countries either). One reason for this may be the central role of England which the authors describe as being the 'biggest player' with each country's child protection system originating to some extent from England.

As hinted at previously, this book can be read as an informative handbook of the child protection systems in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. As the UK plays such an important part in international child protection research and policy, it is very helpful to learn about the systems and tendencies in detail for each country. Furthermore, the book can be read as a carefully written insight into inter-country and intra-country analysis of child protection as it highlights the comparative dimension in a 'hands-on' manner, and most importantly, the book is an in-depth and well-needed overview of formal social responses to protect children.

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